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ABSTRACT

A trustee-in-residence plan is proposed as a possible solution to the problem expressed by governing board members who feel they rarely have the opportunity to develop any real knowledge about their institutions. The plan calls for establishment of a permanent, rotating residency program to permit really interested members to spend most or all of a week on campus. Preferably they should live in a student residential setting, attend classes and seminars and sessions of the Student Council and other student interest groups; eat in residential dining rooms, student union cafeterias, faculty dining rooms; attend Faculty Senate and other faculty meetings; and sit in on the President's Cabinet and/or other administrative sessions. Trustees-in-Residence should also attend some of the cultural events, religious services, intercollegiate and intramural activities, as well as have time and opportunity set aside for informal confrontations with students, faculty, and administrators. (LBH)

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TRUSTEE-IN-RESIDENCE

A PROPOSAL FOR IMPROVED GOVERNANCE

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Management consultants to the nation's educational institutions who work regularly with governing boards often hear the lament that board members rarely have the opportunity to develop any real knowledge in-depth about their respective institution. Such members express the belief that they do not obtain enough input from all sectors of their school's constituency to assure wise decision making by the governing board.

Interviews with board members reveal that they usually feel cut off from the ongoing institutional life of the very place for which they hold policy-making responsibility as a public trust. Many boards find that their major, or in some cases only, source of information is the President. To the extent that this is so it leads to a governing process based upon "shadowy impressions," as recently described by one board member frustrated for over a decade by this kind of apprehension.

Board members are not alone in their uneasiness. Students, who feel increasingly alienated from all adults, view board members, prime representatives of "the Establishment" as distant, impersonal wielders of power over the quality and nature of student and institutional life. These are matters of great personal concern to students.

Faculty occasionally meet board members at formal receptions and convocations, but find little opportunity to share their thoughts and their own sense of commitment to the college to members of the governing body. They view with increasing suspicion their lack of adequate input to and output from the board that too often appears so dependent upon a single channel of communications; i.e., the administration or just the President.

Some recent progress has been made to close this communications and understanding gap in various ways, including: the establishment of ad hoc problem-identification and problem-solving task forces on which board members, administrators, faculty and students sit (often accompanied by other members of the institutional constituency and outside resource persons); by the co-opting of administrators, faculty and students as members of board standing and ad hoc committees; and, in some cases, reserving seats on the board for faculty and student representatives; and by internal councils for dialog and policy implementation and/or recommendation.

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Despite the fact that most board-faculty-student contact in such task-oriented settings are necessarily limited in both time and context, all concerned usually discover, whenever they are able to exchange views and interests on matters of common concern, that there is more that unites them than divides them.

Yet such encounters, so long as they remain hurried and harried, fleeting and fragmentary, will be of minimal value and perhaps only increase the level of personal and institutional frustration. Thus, the task ahead is to develop processes of mutual learning by exposing board members and members of the entire campus community to each other on a continuing and in-depth basis.

At least one clue might be taken from the growing number of successful programs designed to bring varied resource persons on campus for substantial, uninterrupted periods of time.

Artists, poets, writers, composers, politicians, statesmen, business men, and civic leaders -- in residence have provided new insights and inspiration to many American campuses, whether their stay is a week, a month, a term or an academic year. One of the most satisfying results has been the favorable impact upon the visitors as well as upon the hosts.

While usually conceived to be of major benefit to receiving students and faculty, the visiting resource persons invariably acquire new understanding, new knowledge, fresh inspiration and open perspective from the interplay between their own expertise and concerns and the emerging creativity, enthusiasm, commitment, and sensitivity of students and faculty. There is no reason to believe that the experience of Trustees-in-Residence would be any different.

Moreover, one does not really get to know other persons until he has been able to join in the activities of their primary and peer groups in which their respective life styles, standards of value and behavior patterns are engendered. In a word, if board members are really serious about developing an ongoing sense of institutional reality, they need a systematic channel of personalized communications to and from the various segments of the institutional family.

Perhaps, then, governing boards might give serious consideration to establishing a permanent, rotating residency program to permit really interested members to spend most or all of a week on campus. Preferably they should live in a student residential setting, attend classes and seminars and sessions of the Student Council and other student interest groups; eat in residential dining rooms, student union cafeterias, faculty dining rooms; attend Faculty Senate and other faculty meetings; and sit in on the President's Cabinet and/or other administrative sessions.

Trustees-in-Residence should attend some of the cultural events, religious services, intercollegiate and intramural athletic activities, as well as have time and opportunity set aside for informal confrontations with students, faculty and administrators.

If possible, such board members might attend meetings and other gatherings of alumni, associates groups and other friends of the institution with any visiting committees and with local citizen's groups, and civic officials.

In all cases, board members should feel free, as appropriate, to ask questions and raise issues and to respond to the concerns and queries of those they encounter during their period of residence as individuals but not as representatives or spokesmen for the governing board. They should be encouraged also to put in writing a diary and/or summary of their impressions and findings, including any issues and questions requiring further exploration and study, for the benefit of all concerned, especially their fellow board members (and the President).

The rotation schedule should be based upon availability of board members' time and campus facilities, as well as upon the campus calendar. Such a program will not work, of course, unless someone is made responsible for making all the arrangements involved. In this connection, it is suggested that the person in the President's office already charged with servicing and staffing the board be chosen for this task. (If no such person exists, one should be promptly appointed, whether or not a Trustee-in-Residence program is introduced!)

New members of the board should be rotated through as early as possible, as should the board officers, the chairmen of all board standing committees and other members of the Executive Committee.

Even though board members are often persons of prominence with a wide range of interests and responsibilities pressing for their attention and time, they should be nothing less than eager to arrange their own schedules to participate in the Trustee-in-Residence program if they are interested, concerned and committed.

Prolonged disinterest, whether explicit or demonstrated by continued inability or unwillingness to set aside time for a meaningful period of residence on campus may be taken as proof of unsuitability for further service, or at least another term, on the board.

Interest in and willingness to be a Trustee-in-Residence on the part of prospective new members of the board might well be taken as a significant indication of seriousness of purpose and readiness to accept the increasingly heavy responsibilities incumbent upon contemporary institutional trusteemanship.

In addition, if the institution enjoys the assistance of visiting or advisory committees or similar bodies, selected or even all members of such groups might welcome the opportunity to be in-residence for a period of days, thus assuring that their counsel to the institution and its various divisions will be based on first-hand knowledge in some depth.

If our educational institutions are to meet successfully the challenges and opportunities before them in this turbulent decade of change, those responsible for their governance and policy making would seem to owe it to themselves, their institutions and the society to seize every meaningful

opportunity to develop the continuing, constituency-wide mutual trust, understanding and knowledge essential to the creation of that sense of common purpose and direction without which no institution can command its own fate.

The establishment of a Trustee-in-Residence program promises to be a major step forward in assuring the institutional solidarity required for the decade of the Seventies.